**The Man at the Well by Tim O’Brien**

He was just an old man, an old Vietnamese farmer. His hair was white, and he was somewhere over seventy years, stooped and hunched from work in the paddies, his spine bent into a permanent, calcified arc. He was blind. His eyes were huge and empty, glistening like aluminum under the sun, cauterized and burnt out. But the old man got around.

In March we came to his well. He stood and smiled while we used the water. He stood and smiled while we used the water. He laughed when we laughed. To be ingratiating he said, “Good water for good GIs. “Whenever there was occasion, he repeated the phrase.

Some children came to the well, and one of them, a little girl with black hair and hoops of steel through her ears, took the old fellow’s hand, helping him about. The kids giggled at our naked bodies. A boy took a soldier’s rifle from out of the mud and wiped it and stacked it against a tree, and the old man smiled.

Alpha Company decided to spend the day in the old man’s village. We lounged inside his hut, and when resupply choppers brought down cold beer and food, we ate and wasted away the day. The kids administered professional back rubs, chopping and stretching and pushing our blood. They eyed our C rations, and the old blind man helped when he could.

When the wind stopped and the flies became bothersome, we went to the well again. We showered, and the old fellow helped, dipping into the well and yanking up buckets of water and sloshing it over our heads and backs and bellies. The kids watched him wash us. The day was as hot and peaceful as a day can be.

The blind old farmer was showering one of the men. A blustery and stupid soldier, blond hair and big belly, picked up a carton of milk and from fifteen feet away hurled it, for no reason, aiming at the old man and striking him flush on the face. The carton burst. Milk sprayed into the old man’s cataracts. He hunched forward, rocking precariously and searching for balance. He dropped his bucket. His hands went to his eyes then dropped loosely to his thighs. His blind gaze fixed straight ahead, at the stupid soldier’s feet. His tongue moved a little, trying to get at the cut and tasting the blood and milk. No one moved to help. The kids were quiet. The old man’s eyes did a funny trick, almost rolling out of his head, out of sight. He was motionless, and finally he smiled. He picked up the bucket and with the ruins of goodness spread over him, perfect and gore, he dunked into the well and came up with water, and he began showering the next soldier